

Statement by Kawika Smith – senior, Verbum Dei High School

I come from a household where, at any moment, life as you know it would be drastically different. From 2nd grade until now, having permanent housing has been a challenge. As a result, I would be absent from school a lot. I was either moving from one shelter to the next, or I was stressed out and my mental health wasn't good. Even today, when I attend class, I see how my life outside school didn't matter one bit. I had to still be a student and a student only. My trauma and experiences were ignored. Whatever was asked on the test was the only thing that mattered. My undealt-with trauma forced me into survival mode, and made me zone out in class. I would think about whether I would have to sleep in a car again and clean myself out of a gas station sink, not about what Shakespeare was saying in his Sonnets. My trauma has impacted my test-taking experience by being a distraction. I would be very self-conscious because I didn't want my stomach to growl during the test, because I wasn't able to afford food. It seemed like my teachers didn't get it all along, and neither did the education system. I was a child with a dysfunctional lifestyle, in survival mode, and expected to show up fully present in class.

Thankfully I have made it thus far. Now my focus in school is on getting into college. I am still experiencing hardship and working on the trauma, but I have college coming up, so I have no other choice but to push. I have a 3.56 cumulative GPA and a 3.32 unweighted GPA. My PSAT score is 1140, and my scores on similar tests increasingly declined. My school partnered with a SAT program, CollegeSpring. One day out of the week local college students at Cal State Dominguez Hills would come and were expected to help us prepare for the SAT. Only one of the five tutors really taught us, and I would leave my group to go to the other tutor because she knew how to strengthen our test taking skills, but the issue was that others were leaving their groups too to go to her, and she couldn't help all of us. Additionally my teacher who

filled in for the tutors on the days they weren't there did his best in tutoring us, but it didn't suffice.

My more affluent friends were able to afford private tutoring, that had costs ranging from \$2,500 to \$5,000 a month. During the summers they were at SAT tutoring sessions that I couldn't afford. Khan Academy was helpful and affordable, but did not help me improve my scores on the PSAT. My friends who had private tutoring did that on both their PSAT and SAT.

I ended up not taking the SAT the following month because I felt under-prepared. We took simulated SAT tests and my scores increasingly dropped from 1140 to the 980s. While taking these mock SATs I kept questioning if I was intelligent enough.

But I figured it out. This test is flawed. It does not account for my experiences, good and bad. It does not report to the UC's that I am a survivor of being raped in 6th grade and homeless consistently from 2nd to 8th grade. It doesn't account for the domestic violence I endured, the witnessing of murder before I was in 3rd grade, or the death of my brother, which led to me taking over a week off of school second semester of my junior year. More importantly, it doesn't report on how I am working on healing the trauma. The SAT doesn't showcase to the UCs that I recently gave a TEDx talk about me addressing the discriminatory policy at my school and helped initiate change in policy on the state level, in which the Senate bill, SB 188, CROWN ACT will be taking effect January 1st, 2020. It also doesn't highlight that I sit on my neighborhood council as the youth representative, that I am involved in community organizing with community coalition, or even that I am advocating for workers through my involvement with the long-term homecare union SEIU Local 2015. Furthermore, it doesn't highlight that I am working to end child poverty with the Children's Defense Fund, or that I am a youth ambassador with Imagine LA. This is all to say, the SAT score does little to no good for people like me. Instead of focusing on me as a person, I am asked to take a test that supposed to help UC's determine if I am going to make it past my first year of college. Well, newsflash College Board: I

will be graduating with my associate's degree in sociology and my high school diploma simultaneously next Spring, so I will make it past my first two years.

Sadly enough, the scores still are factored into my college admission process. While preparing to choose colleges, I had my mind on Cal Berkeley and UCLA. After college, I aspire to further my public advocacy and activism through government. My aspiration is to work in local government and eventually run for local office, ultimately going up to the federal level. I take pride in California's public state college system, being that it is the best public college system in the nation. I also prefer to attend a UC because UCs have leading social science departments. Attending a UC will offer me the opportunity to work with community based organizations and directly apply what I learn to help build a more equitable California. But when I realized that I would be required to take the SAT my choices were shifted towards schools on the East Coast. The trade-off of going to an East Coast school over a UC is that I will most likely not be able to have my associate's degree recognized and be placed as a junior rather than a second semester freshman. Meanwhile, my friend who's able to afford private tutoring for the SAT nearly scored a perfect score was accepted to Cal Berkeley, without even having to be engaged in the community. I have friends who come from my side of the tracks and were turned down by the UCs, despite them having been engaged in the community or even having an associate's degree. My lifelong dream of attending UCLA or Cal Berkeley is challenged by reality, so I have opted to look towards test-optional colleges. I am scheduled to take the SAT but I am almost certain that I will be going out of state to D.C., and attending a university without using my test scores.

Standardized test like the SAT reminds me that racism and classism have only become more sophisticated. Instead of straight-out saying people of color and underprivileged people aren't allowed, a test is in place to illegitimately justify why such groups of people are not suitable for the UC system.

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I take issue with a top tier public education system, funded by taxpayer's money, using a test that charges aspiring youth like me, to find out if they made the cut. It is inequitable when the results show that Black and Latinx students are scoring low because other students' families have the necessary means to attain resources to ensure a high score.